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The two-faces of Janus: Rethinking social work in the context of conflict



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Social Work and Conflict: a paradoxical relationship

According to IFSW (cited in SWAN-Gre 2011), between 1988 and 2004 more than 40 social workers were detained, kidnapped, tortured or murdered in regions affected by conflict. A close examination of these cases reveals two main issues: a) the concept of conflict is much wider and complex than simply a state of "armed conflict". Very often conflict goes beyond the 'radar' of the Geneva conventions as it can include state violence, low intensity confrontations, ethnic/racial segregation etc. b) Historically, a significant number social workers have been at the forefront of fighting for social justice in their communities, even under the extreme circumstances of political and armed conflicts.

This is a very proud tradition that our profession needs to cherish. Studying and reflecting on this knowledge is of particular importance nowadays, at a time when conflicts engulf an increasing number of global regions and the patterns of violence become increasingly irregular and unpredictable. It is exactly these circumstances that require a social work profession that is alert, knowledgeable, able to make sense of the political/ structural causes of conflict and most importantly prepared to side with the oppressed and vulnerable.

Paulo Freire, the prominent Brazilian pedagogue, while referring to the political dilemmas facing the social work profession highlighted these responsibilities:

"The social worker, as much as the educator, is not a neutral agent, either in practice or in action. One of the inclinations that we sometimes have - and this is an offense, an illegality, that we imbibe in our technological society - is to think that the social worker is a very specialized person, a technician, who works in a compartmentalized technical area, and who has a sort of protection within this area, a sort of aggregate of rights, as a particular social group, to stand apart from the political battles of society. For me, this is impossible. It is an error. (Freire, 1990: 5)".

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However, as I discuss in this editorial and despite the proud tradition of social workers who defended social justice under extraordinary circumstances, our profession's relation to war and conflict has been an uneasy one. The question of "social work in the context of conflict" forms an interesting historical paradox. Although, social work itself has been the direct product of social tensions and political conflicts, the profession has been relatively hesitant in recognizing the dialectic relationship between those two concepts. A quick search on academic databases and the archives of international social work organisations, would easily convince any reader, that academic output and scholar engagement with the topic of conflict is rather anemic and comparatively superficial.

Reluctance to engage with the issue of sociopolitical and armed conflict could be seen as part of a diachronic ambivalence of social work towards politically contentious issues. For decades, the suppression of the 'political' offered a comfort zone that was deemed necessary in the efforts of social work to defend professional status and construct its identity. Thankfully, in recent years the perpetual narrative that treats our profession as an activity inherently benevolent, neutral and devoid of controversies, has been critically interrogated by the main international social work organisations, IFSW and IASSW. The decision of IASSW to dedicate the present issue of *Social Dialogue*, the official magazine of the organisation, to the concept of conflict is a testament to such –welcome– change.

A (very) brief history of Social Work in the Context of Conflict

The first component of the 'conflict' paradox lies on the fact that the origins of social work should be traced in the context of the rising sociopolitical tensions and conflicts, which defined much of the 19th century. At the time, in Europe, birthplace of social work, increasing poverty and vast social inequalities led to an escalation of social conflicts and the subsequent threat of a social revolution. This tension informed a dual state response which was based, on the one hand, on institutionalized and often violent suppression of the working classes and on the other hand, on the development of 'scientific charity' – the moralistic and rigid precursor to modern social work. Therefore, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the roots of social work are directly linked to 19th century class divisions and social conflicts that generated state policies based on the doctrine of "care and control". In this sense, the origins of social work seem to be linked with a historic "carrot and stick" state approach to managing the poor.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the dominant Anglo-centric social work model was primarily exported to the colonies of the British empire, thus extending its paternalistic function towards marginalized indigenous populations. In this initial and rather artificial wave of "internationalization", the profession maintained its conflict-bound character through its close association with the colonial apparatus. It required an extra 50 years until the profession would

experience the most significant and rapid expansion in its history – again not devoid of controversy.

Ironically, such expansion was once again based on a conflict, the intensity, of which was unparalleled to anything humanity had hitherto witnessed. Social Work during the Second World War, did not retain a unified response. Instead it assumed extraordinarily contrasting ideological roles and functions. Although, a long term professional taboo, it is not a secret that during the 1930s and early 1940s the majority of social work institutions and individual practitioners in Germany, Italy and Spain at the time sided with the Nazi and Fascist regimes (See for example Lorenz, 1993). These social workers not only supported the oppressive Nazi principles at an ideological level, but they actively attempted to incorporate the pseudo-science of racial hierarchies in their practice.

Nevertheless, at the same time a glorious and unsung history of anti-fascist resistance emerged and reshaped the social work profession. Its legacy deserves much more attention and celebration than it has received from mainstream historiography. In the eve and during the Second World War, numerous social workers courageously paid their dues in the global fight against Fascism and Nazism. The Spanish civil war, this terrible prelude of the horrors of Nazism, saw the first organized mobilization of social workers against fascism. Hundreds of practitioners sided with the republican forces in their struggles against Franco both through the multiple democratic social projects

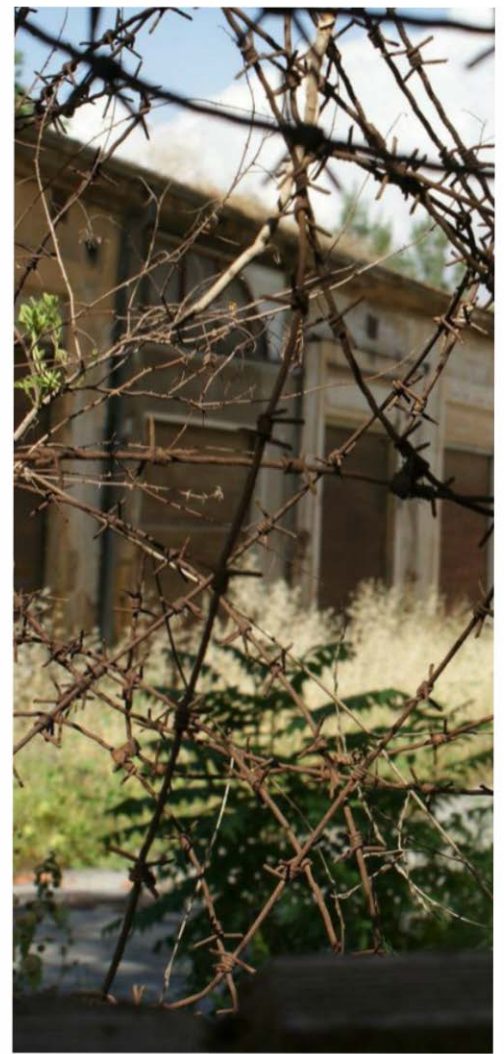
in Spain and also through direct engagement with the armed conflict as International Brigadiers.

The inspiring story of pioneer African American social worker Thyra Edwards from Chicago is suggestive. Thyra a dedicated socialist and antiracist, who strongly believed at the universal nature of the struggle against all oppressions, left the US in 1936 and travelled to Barcelona in order to support Republican forces and work at the Rosa Luxembourg children colony. She also became the primary link between the Afro American communities in the US and the Abraham Lincoln Brigades fighting in Spain assisting the recruitment of black Americans. She died shortly after the war while trying to set up care projects for Jewish children in Rome. At the same time, the "Statement to American social workers on their stake in the civil war in Spain" published by the Social Workers Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy offers another unique and powerful example of social work internationalism and commitment to social justice; a powerful internationalist manifesto crafted and formed in a context of a fierce ideological and military conflict. In the 1940s and as the war engulfed most of Europe and Northern Africa, the Red Aid, a vast anti-fascist network, mobilized thousands of social workers and social welfare practitioners globally in order to develop services caring for refugees, political activists and orphan children (Schilde, 2003). Although, the Red Aid has been the first comprehensive effort to internationalise a politically engaged social work, unfortunately it has been wiped off our history textbooks. A better-known example of social workers' courage at a time of conflict is this of Polish-Jewish social worker Irena Sendler who between 1940 and 1943 saved nearly 2,500 children from the Warsaw Ghetto.

The end of the Second World War and the defeat of the Nazis and their allies signified a major expansion of social work, not only in countries where the profession already pre-existed but also in regions and societies that had never heard of

social work before. The primary mission of the profession in the 1940's and early 1950's was to contribute towards reconciliation and reconstruction of the war-torn regions, an objective that in effect covered much of the world. Under the auspices and 'prestige' of the newly formed United Nations, the profession attempted to redefine itself as a modern force for peace and social betterment. The creation of universal welfare states in several western countries significantly assisted such process. Nevertheless, the beginning of the Cold War combined with the subsequent rise of anti-communist witch-hunts in the West and institutional skepticism over social work in the East, suppressed the legacies of a politically engaged social work and redirected the profession's priorities towards the individualistic notions of 'therapy and rehabilitation'. Of course, the implementation of the mainstream social work vision and expectations about professional recognition, or the lack of it, was proved to be a much more challenging and problematic task than the optimistic social work leaders of the 1950's would expect; discussion of these challenges, mostly related to the (un)suitability of professional practices to the complex and diverse needs of the recipient societies, goes beyond the scope of this short editorial.

The cold war was an irregular ideological war that was fought, inter alia, through regional or country-specific proxy conflicts. In this context, several countries experienced violent suppression of civil liberties and the rise of military dictatorships (for example Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Greece, Portugal). Social work, once again, found itself at the center of these ideological conflicts. Despite the significant resistance of diverse groups of social workers that eventually formed the vital reconceptualization movement in Latin America, state social work institutions by and large collaborated with dictatorial regimes and in return they enjoyed 'professional recognition' within the state apparatus. Reflecting on some of the most shocking examples of



such collaboration, one could refer to the scandal of illegal adoptions in Chile where children from left wing families were kidnapped and given to 'nationally minded citizens' for adoption, the shared intelligence between social workers and the police in Argentina that led to the disappearances and torture of several activists (Alayon, 2010), the uninterrupted involvement of social workers in the segregated and racist social services in South Africa (Smith, 2008) and the 'jobs for obedience' approach of Greek social workers during the military junta (Ioakimidis, 2011). In a more recent and very important development for international social work, Latin American professional associations started exploring the consequences of social workers' collaboration with oppressive regimes and helped document the "Nunca Mas" (never again) agenda that forms an important legacy for our profession.

Modern "Irregular wars" and the ethical implications for social work



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The end of the cold war did not bring about an end to global conflicts, despite the complacency of many pundits who in the early 1990's had predicted a prolonged period of stability and prosperity. The disintegration of former socialist states helped the re-emergence of suppressed nationalisms in Eastern Europe and Asia. Social workers in these regions could not find the answers to the immediate political challenges they witnessed and in a rather mechanistic way sided with the emerging state apparatuses, which turned overnight from socialist to nationalist. The example of former Yugoslavia, where social services adapted themselves to the rhetoric of nationalism and quickly developed a quasi-militaristic structure is indicative of the limitations of the profession in transitional contexts (see article on Bosnia in this issue). The transition to capitalism meant that where nationalist wars weren't fought, armed conflicts were replaced by low intensity internal tensions in the form of turbo-capitalism and violent disintegration of welfare states.

The extraordinary neoliberal influence of post- cold war conflicts marks the rise of a new era of globalized commercialization of war and peace. On the one hand an aggressive 'war industry' has been created through the redefinition of the role of NATO and the introduction of the absurd notion of "militarized humanitarianism". This notions heavily relies on the gradual privatization of armies and outsourcing of national defence and international military interventions (see for example the case of Black Waters in Iraq and G4S in Israel). Therefore in the 21st century 'war' has become a multi-billion dollars industry which brings together arms' manufacturers, private armies, international security think-tanks and hawkish lobbies attached to national governments.

Ironically, the domination of neoliberalism has also created a "peace industry", an odd state of affairs representing anything but true meaning of the first component of the phrase. The actual objective of this industry is not to promote global peace and justice but rather to reap the financial benefits of post conflict reconstruction and societies in transition. The 'peace industry' primarily consists of international NGO's that develop expertise and toolkits ready to be imported to countries affected by conflict. As contributors to the present issue explain in their articles, the lucrative "peace industry" which often employs social workers and social work academics, rarely cares about the structural reasons behind wars and primarily focuses on short term fixes and target-driven services. Perhaps the most damaging service this incongruous industry provides is its determination to facilitate the transition of war-torn societies to post-conflict structures that obey the neoliberal orthodoxy. Under the pretext of 'liberal peace' this process condemns the affected countries to a perpetual status of 'failed states' or 'debt-colonies'.

The paradoxical nature of social work in the context of conflict has not been resolved in the 21st century but instead it has taken the form of a more subtle and complicated affair. As the globe

becomes engulfed in the obscurity and viciousness of the War on Terror, social workers have to deal with the unexpected consequences of a rapidly changing landscape. The illegal war and occupation of Iraq can be seen as a watershed moment in the transformation of global conflicts and their impact on the 'helping professions'. In 2003 and despite the extraordinary opposition within the UK and the US, the 'coalition of the willing' unleashed an unprecedented in scope and illegal according to international law attack on Iraq, which we now know that based on false pretenses. Within the course of ten years a whole country was wrecked, about 4 million people were displaced, hundreds of thousands were killed, Islamic fundamentalism was re-born and the Geneva Convention was thrown into the dust-bin (GPF, 2010).

The most powerful and disturbing symbolism in the transition to this new era of irregular conflicts and 'flexible' interpretation of human rights, has been the creation of the US detention centre in Guantanamo. This base quickly became the synonym of modern dark-ages; a place where individuals could be summarily transferred, without trial, without access to legal support and suffer detention under inhuman conditions. The recent revelation of systematic torture of detainees, under the ludicrous technical description 'enhanced interrogation techniques' brought the ethics of 'helping professions' into question, for it was a group of psychologists who were paid by the CIA more than 80 million dollars in order to use their scientific expertise for the development of 'effective' torture techniques (The Telegraph, 9 December 2014). In an equally disturbing development, the presence of individual social work practitioners under the disguise of caring for juvenile detainees or supporting the needs of the military (military social work) in Guantanamo has also been documented (Michaels, 2005). It is important, however, to mention that the US National Association of Social Workers not only has condemned the operation of Guantanamo but it has also actively



campaigned for its closure (NASW, 2004). Nevertheless, the issue of social workers' involvement in state institutions linked to state violence and violation of human rights (ie military social work) remains largely unanswered by international social work organisations.

Italian scholar Giorgio Agamben (2005) provided us with an important conceptualization of the ethical irregularities embedded in the war on terror when he referred to the rise of a "state of exception"; a suspension of the juridical order which is exploited by the state in order to curb liberties and justify oppressive measures in the name of a nominal or actual threat to national security and order. It is exactly this state of "legalized lawlessness" that we have been witnessing in many countries that pledge to fight the so called enemy within. Once again, social work, a profession tightly linked to the state, has been invited to play an ambiguous role. More recently, social workers have been appointed in detention centers for asylum seekers, institutions of ambiguous legality that have been created in many European countries in opposition to international conventions for the rights of refugees. Also, social and community workers in the United Kingdom and France have been recruited in order to 'reach out' to Muslim communities and identify potential cases of extremism and radicalization of young people (see 'Prevent Strategy'). Within the context of rising Islamophobia and the steady erosion of civil liberties the proposed collaboration of social workers with intelligence services and law enforcement institutions requires careful interrogation for

it has the potential to oppress, victimize and stigmatize entire communities. The logic and scope of the Prevent Agenda suggests that social workers involved in such projects would probably be expected to police and control vulnerable communities instead of working with them in order promote social justice and equality. Certainly, the social work answer to the disproportional levels of inequality, poverty and marginalization of minority communities cannot be further policing and manipulation.

Towards the creation of a 'transitional social work', unconditionally committed to social justice.

In this brief editorial we attempted to highlight the crucial interlinks between social work and the realities of conflict. We explained that although social work has been shaped by various and diverse historical conflicts, the implications of such intersection have only been examined superficially. The complexity of the global political landscape, the rapid rise in the number of conflicts and the steady erosion of human rights are aspects that require more than a superficial and idle social work response. In fact, such idleness could be detrimental to the development of the profession, reducing it to either an activity irrelevant to affected societies or –at worse- to an institution oppressive in its nature and operation.

Therefore, in this special issue we propose that social work is in urgent need of a paradigm shift regarding the way it understands and responds to political and military conflicts. The entrenched contradictions and rapid social

transitions that occur in the context of conflict need to be at the center of such approach, forming a "transitional social work" that is based on the following characteristics:

- a) **Critical Understanding of the social and political tensions that escalate to conflicts.**
Contrary to mainstream "peace studies" that treat conflicts as the illogical outcome of competing and immature "tribes", on-the-field realities are much more complex and reliant on broader socio-political factors. For example, referring to countries that have long suffered from the grip of colonial or postcolonial aggression, as "failed states", clearly obscures historical facts and hides the responsibility of the colonial and imperialist countries/ organisations. As a result, pseudo-neutral narratives only produce distorted and manipulative approaches to reconciliation. By definition, most conflicts are deeply rooted in historical injustices such as chronic inequalities, unequal distribution of land, illegal occupation etc. Therefore, a social justice based "transitional social work" needs to fully appreciate the structural causes of conflicts and work towards exposing and resolving these injustices.
- b) **Appreciate the role of the state in dealing with conflicts.**
Social work is a profession directly related and dependent to state services and policies. The state is never a neutral political agent and its operation reflects the major divisions that characterize society as a whole. In times of conflict the risk of

systemic oppression and state violence increases exponentially. As we explained above, one of the first consequences of conflict is the militarization of social services, which tend to become yet another state tool for segregation and discrimination. Transitional social work cannot afford to surrender its values and principles to a condition of "legalized lawlessness". Internationalism and the formation of social alliances can be crucial in dealing with ethical dilemmas emerging through the logic of the "state of exception".

- c) **Avoid "top-down toolkits" and listen to the collective expertise of the affected societies.** The "peace industry" involved in post-conflict transitions is often quick to produce and impose technical toolkits. Often, these toolkits bear no relevance to the real needs of communities on the ground and have been designed by organizations and institutions (such as the World Bank and IMF) committed to neo-liberal orthodoxy. Social Services that uncritically adopt neoliberal toolkits, indirectly facilitate the creation of non-viable and donor-dependent societies that suppress the structural causes of war and nurture cronyism and corruption. The vast privatization projects in post conflict Bosnia and Iraq as well as the hard-core neoliberalism of Latin American dictatorships are representative examples of the scope of the neoliberal view on "post conflict reconstruction". Transitional social work should listen to people affected by war and learn from the extraordinary grassroots expertise communities develop in times of extremis. This expertise is far more superior, effective and relevant.
- d) **Peace is much more than the absence of war.** Democratic accountability, collective reparations and the uncompromising quest for truth are crucial aspects of healing and reconciliation. Social work can become the

vehicle for reclaiming the social character of the reconciliation process, in opposition to narrow legalistic discourses focusing on punishment and dominant business approaches prioritizing "economic reconstruction". It is important to remember that the end of a war could only mean continuation of conflict through different means, if endemic social and political inequalities are not addressed. Therefore the role of social work in this context should be to amplify the voices of the affected communities and advocate for sustainable and viable peace, based on social justice, social equality and the empowerment of peoples.

- e) **Above all, unconditionally oppose all unjust wars and support local and international anti-war movements.** Social workers who work with refugees, displaced communities and victims of torture know all too well how catastrophic and irreparably damaging armed conflicts are. The simplest and most powerful solution to deal with the suffering caused by war is the actual prevention of wars. Anti-war movements have been instrumental in exposing imperialist calculations behind conflicts and prevent military interventions based on false pretenses. Social workers' frontline knowledge and expertise can be crucial in documenting the horrors of war and inspiring anti-war movements.

We hope that the publication of the present special issue will open up a much needed debate within the profession and it will contribute towards the exploration of new approaches that can make a difference in the lives of communities and individuals affected by conflict. The current issue includes a wide range of articles, appreciating the complexity and diversity of conflicts. It focuses on case studies from Eastern Europe, the Balkans, Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and Australia although the authors' analysis go beyond the constraints of a narrow definition of armed

conflict. The history of our profession and the struggles of the people we work with, demand that we remain not silent when communities are crushed by political oppression and violent conflict. Let's be brave, speak up and defend the values of our profession, even in the most dangerous of circumstances. Even if this process demands that we engage with a challenging and at times painful soul-searching. ●

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